

American

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President Obama's Iftar Remarks

"Ramadan is a reminder that Islam has always been part of America," he says

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
State Dining Room
August 13, 2010

**REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT IFTAR DINNER**

THE PRESIDENT: Good evening, everybody. Welcome. Please, have a seat. Well, welcome to the White House. To you, to Muslim Americans across our country, and to more than one billion Muslims around the world, I extend my best wishes on this holy month. Ramadan Kareem.

I want to welcome members of the diplomatic corps; members of my administration; and members of Congress, including Rush Holt, John Conyers, and Andre Carson, who is one of two Muslim American members of Congress, along with Keith Ellison. So welcome, all of you.

Here at the White House, we have a tradition of hosting iftars that goes back several years, just as we host Christmas parties and seders and Diwali celebrations. And these events celebrate the role of faith in the lives of the American people. They remind us of the basic truth that we are all children of God, and we all draw strength and a sense of purpose from our beliefs.

These events are also an affirmation of who we are as Americans. Our Founders understood that the best way to honor the place of faith in the lives of our people was to protect their freedom to practice religion. In the Virginia Act of Establishing Religion Freedom, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion." The First Amendment of our Constitution established the freedom of religion as the law of the land. And that right has been upheld ever since.

Indeed, over the course of our history, religion has flourished within our borders precisely because Americans have had the right to worship as they choose — including the right to believe in no religion at all. And it is a testament to the wisdom of our Founders that America remains deeply religious — a nation where the ability of peoples of different faiths to coexist peacefully and with mutual respect for one another stands in stark contrast to the religious conflict that persists elsewhere around the globe.

Now, that's not to say that religion is without controversy.

Recently, attention has been focused on the construction of mosques in certain communities — particularly New York. Now, we must all recognize and respect the sensitivities surrounding the development of Lower Manhattan. The 9/11 attacks were a deeply traumatic event for our country. And the pain and the experience of suffering by those who lost loved ones is just unimaginable. So I understand the emotions that this issue engenders. And Ground Zero is, indeed, hallowed ground.

But let me be clear. As a citizen, and as President, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practice their religion as everyone else in this country. And that includes the right to build a place of worship and a community center on private property in Lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances. This is America. And our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakeable. The principle that people of all faiths are welcome in this country and that they will not be treated differently by their government is essential to who we are. The writ of the Founders must endure.

We must never forget those who we lost so tragically on 9/11, and we must always honor those who led the response to that attack — from the firefighters who charged up smoke-filled staircases, to our troops who are serving in Afghanistan today. And let us also remember who we're fighting against, and what we're fighting for. Our enemies respect no religious freedom. Al Qaeda's cause is not Islam — it's a gross distortion of Islam. These are not religious leaders — they're terrorists who murder innocent men and women and children. In fact, al Qaeda has killed more Muslims than people of any other religion — and that list of victims includes innocent Muslims who were killed on 9/11.

So that's who we're fighting against. And the reason that we will win this fight is not simply the strength of our arms — it is the strength of our values. The democracy that we uphold. The freedoms that we cherish. The laws that we apply without regard to race, or religion, or wealth, or status. Our capacity to show not merely tolerance, but respect towards those who are different from us — and that way of life, that quintessentially American creed, stands in stark contrast to the nihilism of those who attacked us on that September morning, and who continue to plot against us today.

In my inaugural address I said that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and every culture, drawn from every end of this Earth. And that diversity can bring difficult debates. This is not unique to our time. Past eras have seen controversies about the construction of synagogues or Catholic churches. But

time and again, the American people have demonstrated that we can work through these issues, and stay true to our core values, and emerge stronger for it. So it must be — and will be — today.

And tonight, we are reminded that Ramadan is a celebration of a faith known for great diversity. And Ramadan is a reminder that Islam has always been a part of America. The first Muslim ambassador to the United States, from Tunisia, was hosted by President Jefferson, who arranged a sunset dinner for his guest because it was Ramadan — making it the first known iftar at the White House, more than 200 years ago.

Like so many other immigrants, generations of Muslims came to forge their future here. They became farmers and merchants, worked in mills and factories. They helped lay the railroads. They helped to build America. They founded the first Islamic center in New York City in the 1890s. They built America's first mosque on the prairie of North Dakota. And perhaps the oldest surviving mosque in America — still in use today — is in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Today, our nation is strengthened by millions of Muslim Americans. They excel in every walk of life. Muslim American communities — including mosques in all 50 states — also serve their neighbors. Muslim Americans protect our communities as police officers and firefighters and first responders. Muslim American clerics have spoken out against terror and extremism, reaffirming that Islam teaches that one must save human life, not take it. And Muslim Americans serve with honor in our military. At next week's iftar at the Pentagon, tribute will be paid to three soldiers who gave their lives in Iraq and now rest among the heroes of Arlington National Cemetery.

These Muslim Americans died for the security that we depend on, and the freedoms that we cherish. They are part of an unbroken line of Americans that stretches back to our founding; Americans of all faiths who have served and sacrificed to extend the promise of America to new generations, and to ensure that what is exceptional about America is protected — our commitment to stay true to our core values, and our ability slowly but surely to perfect our union.

For in the end, we remain "one nation, under God, indivisible." And we can only achieve "liberty and justice for all" if we live by that one rule at the heart of every great religion, including Islam — that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

So thank you all for being here. I wish you a blessed Ramadan. And with that, let us eat.

Secretary Clinton on Persecution of Religious Minorities in Iran

United States committed to defending religious freedom worldwide

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Office of the Spokesman
August 12, 2010

STATEMENT BY SECRETARY CLINTON

Persecution of Religious Minorities in Iran

The United States is deeply concerned with the Iranian government's continued persecution of Baha'is and other religious minority communities in Iran.

This week, seven Baha'i leaders, who were incarcerated and held for nearly two years without due process, were each sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. The United States strongly condemns this sentencing as a violation of Iran's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Freedom of religion is the birthright of people of all faiths and beliefs in all places. The United States is committed to defending religious freedom around the world, and we have not forgotten the Baha'i community in Iran. We will continue to speak out against injustice and call on the Iranian government to respect the fundamental rights of all its citizens in accordance with its international obligations.

Southwest Border Security Law Targets Organized Crime

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama has signed into law a border security measure that will add resources and personnel to combat crime and the trafficking of people, drugs, currency and weapons across the U.S.-Mexican border, as well as boost partnership with Mexican officials against criminal organizations.

The president welcomed the U.S. Senate's August 12 passage of the Southwest Border Security bill and signed the measure into law August 13. In an August 12 statement, Obama said the measure will help to "build upon our successful efforts to protect communities along the Southwest border and across the country" and will "strengthen our partnership with Mexico in targeting the gangs and criminal organizations."

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told reporters August 13 that the \$600 million provided under the legislation is part of a "long-term,

systematic effort to defeat the cartels and to continue to secure the border."

It adds an additional 1,000 Border Patrol agents and 200 more Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents who will focus on "special investigations involving the cartels that use that border and its trafficking routes," she said. It also increases the number of unmanned aerial systems to monitor activity along the border.

"This is the most ... systemic border security package ... that we've ever seen," she said.

The ICE agents have been given "clear priorities" to focus on criminal aliens, gang members and felony fugitives, Napolitano said. She described the Obama administration's partnership with Mexican law enforcement as "unprecedented."

The additional \$600 million in personnel and resources is being focused "on where we think the best efforts ought to be," she said, "and that is making sure we are removing from our country criminal aliens, felony fugitives, gang members who are also in our country illegally, particularly once they've served their sentences."

Already as a result of the Obama administration's efforts to combat transnational criminal organizations along the border, "illegal crossings are way down, and seizures of drugs and guns and cash are way up," she said. The new legislation "makes permanent many of the assets that this administration has surged along the border during the past 18 months."

U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Carlos Pascual said August 12 that it is crucial to control the flow of arms from the United States to drug traffickers in Mexico. The weapons are being used to "confront authorities and to intimidate and extort citizens."

Pascual was speaking in El Paso, Texas, at a conference on "Re-Envisioning The Border Community To Foster A U.S.-Mexico Partnership For Prosperity, Progress And Socio-Economic Development."

Both the ICE and the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) are cooperating on weapons seizures, and ATF's eTrace database now has a Spanish-language interface that is allowing Mexican investigators to trace weapons known to originate in the United States, he said.

Pascual highlighted the August 10 sentencing of Alejandro Medrano, a 23-year-old U.S. citizen, and other members of a group that conspired to purchase firearms from gun dealers in Arizona on behalf of a member of the Sinaloa drug cartel. The ATF's use of eTrace allowed U.S. law enforcement personnel to identify the gun traffickers

and track the movement of the weapons.

In an August 10 press release by the U.S. Embassy in Mexico, Pascual said he was pleased that cooperation with Mexican authorities and the use of new technology had "shut down the activities of this criminal group that had been collaborating with one of the most notorious drug trafficking organizations in Mexico."

U.S. Sending Disaster Aid for Russian Forest Fires

First firefighting equipment expected August 13

By Dom DiPasquale

Staff Writer

Washington — The United States is airlifting firefighting equipment to Russia as part of a comprehensive governmentwide response to the severe, ongoing wildfires that have blazed across large areas of Russia in recent weeks.

Two U.S. Air Force C-130 military transports from the U.S. European Command and a charter flight from California were scheduled to land in Moscow on the evening of August 13. Two more C-130 flights were expected to arrive the following day, and a second charter aircraft by August 17.

The technical equipment, valued at \$2.5 million, includes water storage tanks, pumps, hand tools, fire-protection clothing and medical kits. The equipment is destined for the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations and the Russian Federal Forestry Agency's Airborne Forest Protection Service. The overall value of U.S. support was put at \$4.5 million.

In addition to assistance from the U.S. federal government, the state of California is donating a planeload of fire-protection clothing, which was identified as a critical need by Russian firefighting authorities.

In addition, the U.S. government has contributed \$50,000 to support the operation of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) to provide 1,600 victims of the Russian fires with blankets, bedding and food.

"The United States stands with the people of Russia as they fight to contain the destructive spread of wildfires, which have taken lives and displaced many from their homes," said State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley August 13. "We are taking action to support the heroic efforts of Russian firefighters and emergency responders as they seek to bring these fires under control."

The U.S. response involves several government agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service (part of the Agriculture Department), the Bureau of Land Management (part of

the Interior Department), the Defense Department, the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations reported that 66 major fires continued to burn as of August 12, with 40 of them in peat bogs, which makes them particularly difficult to extinguish. The fires have claimed 54 lives directly and created thick smog that blanketed Moscow in recent days and posed a serious health hazard. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said the fires have destroyed one-quarter of the country's farmland used to grow cereal crops.

Under the auspices of the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission, the two countries already have been strengthening their joint capacity to respond to such natural disasters and other emergencies through a working group that links appropriate Russian and American government agencies. This working group listed the exchange of best practices in firefighting as one of its priorities for future cooperation.

The U.S. departments of Agriculture and Interior have a long history of exchanging information and technical expertise with Russian forestry and firefighting agencies in such areas as firefighter training and wildfire behavior.

Russia, in turn, offered assistance to the United States in the aftermath of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and, more recently, in this year's oil spill clean-up efforts in the Gulf of Mexico.

An animation provided by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory shows the spread of carbon monoxide pollution originating from wildfires in Russia and western Canada. The animation was created with data from the Atmospheric Infrared Sounder instrument aboard NASA's Aqua satellite.

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